Half-Hour Portraits of Dickens's Greatest Characters

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Before Dickens's day, art and literature had been dressing its criminals in gold lace and plumed hats. Nobody except Hogarth had drawn the ugly, dirty ragged truth. Captain Macheath swaggered in the story and on stage with all the charm and romantic bravery and enterprise, blessed by the love of beautiful women, making merry in snug taverns. Bulwer Lytton had painted Paul Clifford in such aspect as made it far better to be a highwayman and robber than a common honest citizen.

It had been an age of artistic, literary social and political smirk and make-believe sentiment. The wind that blew health through the world from the whirling storm centre of the French Revolution had blown away much of the trippery; but there was much left—so much, that when Dickens came out with "Oliver Twist," it struck Great Britain like a club.

Dickens never was guilty of the deadly dullness of writing a novel with a purpose. There never was such narrowness in his literary method. But his whole life was so full of purpose, the whole man was such a natural antagonist of anything and everything that was wrong, that nearly every chapter he ever wrote has in it a blow at some social superstition. "Oliver Twist" hit the pet social superstition of the picturesque thief and smashed it so utterly that it never has come to life again except in dime novels. The foul and frowsy den of old Fagin, its inmates' rags that hardly hold together, the wet, shelterless streets—these, as Dickens says in his preface to "Oliver Twist," are not likely to allure even the most jolter-headed of juveniles.

Bill Sikes startled England. Bill Sikes startles and horrifies a multitude of people to-day. It is extremely probable that during the seventy-four years since Bill Sikes was described he has startled and horrified a fair army of young persons into avoiding the road that leads to the gallows—that road that Dickens's predecessors had painted as a moonlit one along which the criminal cantered gaily in crimson coat and ruffles.

IX.—Bill Sikes; Dickens's Most Startling Character

EXCEPT in species, there was little difference between Bill Sikes and Bull's-eye. Bill Sikes was the man and Bull's-eye was the dog. In point of evil looks, intellect, surliness of disposition and ferocity of action they were closely alike. They walked alike, treated acquaintances and strangers alike, expressed themselves very much alike and ate alike. The one clear advantage the man had over the dog was that the man could get drunk. Except for this, it might be said quite justly that the dog had succeeded very thoroughly in getting down to his master's level.

They were close and practically inseparable friends. This friendship was not a weakening, soft sentiment. Mr. Sikes preserved his rugged independence of thought sufficiently to choke, kick, hammer and cut his friend Bull's-eye whenever he felt like it; and Bull's-eye responded to these caresses with teeth that did their best to annihilate his friend, Mr. Sikes.

In the thieves' quarter, and especially in Mr. Fagin's headquarters for training the young idea how to pick pockets, Bull's-eye was an object of admiration second only to his owner. When the evil creature licked his lips hungrily, waiting for the word to tear somebody down, or when he sat watching something that his master had placed in his charge, and his red eyes looked longingly for somebody to touch it, the respectful admirers always repeated Mr. Sikes's own encomium that Bull's-eye was as willing as a Christian.

The larger of these two animals was a housebreaker by profession. He had a broad, heavy face, from which his eyes scowled very much as the dog's bloodshot ones scowled from that animal's dirty white face. And as the dog's face constantly bore from half a dozen to a score of wounds and scratches, so the housebreaker's face rarely lacked ornamentations of a similar nature. Besides bruises, a three days' growth of beard was the nearly invariable ornament of his countenance, which semed always to need iron bars in front of it to make it quite complete.

Mr. Fagin, being a "fence" for converting the proceeds of house robberies into money, a rather close partnership existed between them. Though Mr. Fagin robbed Mr. Sikes, and though Mr. Sikes frequently swore, with a grimness that was too real for humor, that he would cut Mr. Fagin's throat, each knew so well that the other could hang him that they remained linked together, despite hearty mutual dislike and mistrust.

Owing to the pernicious activity of the police, Mr. Fagin was forced to maintain more than one refuge for his male and female proteges. These refuges were all alike—hidden away at the ends of inaccessible alleys, dirty with the grime of years that never a hand tried to remove, furnished with ragged beds laid out on the foul floors, with a few tottering chairs and a greasy table, and illuminated day and night by tallow candles stuck into bottles and other makeshifts for candlesticks. In these, like vermin burrowing underground, Mr. Fagin's pickpockets and petty robbers met and, at rare intervals, had the honor of entertaining the greater lights, such as Bill Sikes or Toby Crackit, when these prominent professionals condescended to drink with the small fry and curse at it.

In one of these visits of state, Mr. Sikes met a girl who had the fortune to gain his approval. She was good-looking still, although her face was hard and reckless, and dissipation and vice had marked it with premature age. Her name was Nancy. She was one of those whom Fagin had picked up in childhood and trained to theft.

Associating from youth with only lost creatures; having experience of more than one jail; accustomed to see her acquaintances and comrades end in prison cells or on the gallows, she still had in her some distorted vestige of a woman's heart. It was strange that it should be there at all. It was not strange that it should manifest itself in a poor and distorted way. She became Mr. Sikes's slave, more devoted to him than his dog, and he, in return, liked her fully as well as he did Bull's-eye, and did not, on the whole, beat her much oftener.

What was it that made this strange thing grow even in that degraded life? Ask what makes love spring up in the very pit—for this was love, wretched, distorted, evil, as it could not help but be, growing in such a wretched and evil soil—yet it was love! We know only that it is so, and so with thousands of women as bad and wretched as she was, something that holds them through every suffering and ill usage!

Though there was no feeling remotely resembling this passion in that anatomical part of Mr. Sikes known as his heart, his feeling for Nancy might be called almost exalted in one respect at least. He trusted her; and as he never had trusted any human being before, it was evident that there was something like high emotion in his breast. Indeed, her trustworthiness became his boast, and over quart pots of liquor he sang her praises in magnificent oaths.

One day Mr. Fagin, in pursuit of his educational life-work, picked up a young boy, who said that his name was Oliver Twist. Oliver had run away from the poorhouse authorities of a nearby village to escape their charity, which was so scientific that it proved triumphantly how nearly a human being could be starved to death without quite perishing.

"They made their way to the country house marked out for robbery."

Oliver knew nothing of his parentage, except that his mother had been picked up dying on the roadside, and that he had been born in the poorhouse, to which they carried her. When Fagin found him and took him to his den he did so merely because he thought that the waif's innocent face would make him an excellent asset as a pocketbook. Before long, however, he learned that Oliver was a better asset than that.

A man who had possession of a small fortune to which the boy was heir had started secret inquiries, hoping to assure himself that Oliver was dead and that his possession could not be disputed. The search led him at last to Fagin; and that kindly old gentleman, always eager to do benevolent deeds, agreed to keep the lad in his hands and make a thief of him. Mr. Fagin did not tell the visitor that he would have made a thief of Oliver anyway. He pocketed the excellent bribe that was offered and hugged himself at the gleeful thought of the many other sums that he would extort as hush money in future.

As a first step toward carrying out his plans, Fagin decided to lend Oliver to Mr. Sikes, who had a house-breaking job in mind which demanded the services of a small boy to crawl through a pantry window. Before they started Mr. Sikes stood the boy up in front of him, while he produced a pistol. "You know wot this is, eh?" he growled. "Well, then, look here! This is powder. That 'ere's a bullet. This is a little bit of a old hat for waddin'." He proceeded to load the pistol with great nicety and deliberation. Then he put the barrel to the boy's head. "Now," said he, savagely, "if you speak a word when you go out with me, except when I speak to you, that loading will be in your head without notice!"

Having been joined by Toby Crackit, they made their way, cautiously, to the country house marked out for robbery. With a final terrible threat, Sikes lifted the little boy to the window and pushed him through. Trembling with terror, the lad crept forward with only one conscious idea in his bewildered brain. It was to alarm the inmates as soon as he was out of the range of Sikes's pistol.

He had not moved far, when the housebreaker shouted: "Back! Back!" There was a flash and a stunning report, and Oliver fell. He had staggered and tumbled backward where Sikes could reach him. The powerful man pulled him through the little aperture and set off at top speed, carrying the boy slung over his back, head down. The house servant, who had shot him, pursued them with others whom the alarm had raised, and at last the robber, hard pressed, dropped his burden in a ditch and ran off.

Sikes cursed when he say that he was alone, and that Toby Crackit, thanks to long legs and a long head, had gotten clear away, having started off at the first alarm. Mr. Crackit succeded in keeping so far ahead of the hunt that he managed to get to London, while Sikes had to lie close in the country, waiting a more favorable opportunity.

Mr. Crackit was amazed when he saw the effect that his news had on Fagin. "The boy! The boy!" screamed Fagin, looking like a red devil. He pulled his grizzled, matted hair, as his vehement manner was when he was sorely frightened or excited, and rushed headlong out of a den to Sikes's dwelling place.

He found only Nancy there; and in his rage he screamed at her that Sikes must bring the boy back at any cost. "He's worth hundreds of pounds to me!" he cried, his fury getting the better of his usual prudence. "If Sikes comes back and doesn't bring the boy, murder him yourself if you'd have him escape Jack Ketch! I can hang him with half a dozen words!"

Hardly had he uttered the threat before he regained his presence of mind. He stole a frightened look at the girl. She stared at him listlessly, stupidly, and presented every appearance of being quite drunk—an appearance which was borne out by a smell of gin that pervaded the room. Fagin put a few cunning questions to her. She answered so ramblingly that he felt assured she had not comprehended what he had uttered in his fury. He cast one last look at her, as she sat at the table, her head drooping heavily, and stepped softly from the room.

A change came over her instantly. She was up and after him. Hurriedly as he went, far as he went, she pursued him as steadily, as softly, as unescapable as a shadow. Fate was closing around the old man—was closing around them all; on this very night, when he had betrayed himself and sent her to spy on him, he went to meet Monks, the man who wanted Oliver Twist kept out of the way.

Nancy managed to hear what they said. She learned enough to make a good guess at the secret.

When Sikes succeeded at last in entering London again Fagin's old mask of friendship and servility was on him once more. By this time they knew that the inmates of the house had found Oliver, taken him in and nursed him through his wound; that he had told them his story; and that the tender-hearted people had decided not to pursue the criminals, for fear of getting the boy into trouble with the authorities. The spies who had learned all this for Fagin reported that Oliver was to stay with his new protectors. But by this time, too, the girl Nancy, spying indefatigably on Fagin, had discovered nearly all about Monks and his purpose.

She had seen many children destroyed body and soul by Fagin, as she had been herself, and she had felt hardly an emotion about it. But from the very beginning there had been something about the utter innocence of Oliver that stirred her. It stirred that same small spring of remaining good in her that made her Bill Sikes's slave, and made her so staunch even to those who had wrecked her life that, though all the criminals of the gang mistrusted each other, they never mistrusted her.

She resolved to save the boy. She went secretly to his new friends and told them what she knew, after she had made them swear not to take a step that would harm Fagin or Sikes. Her information was more than sufficient for them to find friends and relatives of Oliver's parents; and these agreed to keep her secret, not to use the police even against Monks, but to deal with him privately, as they could very easily with the knowledge they had from the girl. They pledged themselves to do it in such a way that Monks himself should not be able to suspect whence his betrayal had come.

They wanted to do something for her. They offered to find a home for her, to give her asylum in a foreign country where she would be safe. She refused it. She refused every possible form of help. It was too late, she said. She must go back to her life, such as it was, and so long as it might last.

Secretly though Nancy had acted, cautiously though she had moved, it chanced that she was seen and followed and spied upon by one of Fagin's men. The spy saw and heard enough to suspect that the girl was betraying Fagin and Sikes.

Every evil thing that lay in Fagin's heart; every vile emotion that could be stirred and set into a whirl by rage and hatred and fear; every black purpose of which he was capable, were set to working within him when the spy brought his news. When he met Sikes he tried to speak to him, but his passion was too great for words at first, and he could only shake his trembling forefinger in the air. When at last he could control himself and told what had been learned, Sikes leaped up fiercely.

"Hell's fire!" he screamed.

"Bill, Bill!" cried the old man. "Only a word!"

The housebreaker would not have listened had he been able in his blind fury to open the door. He was delayed long enough to let Fagin come up with him. "Hear me speak a word!" he panted. "You won't be—"

"Well?" demanded the housebreaker.

The day was dawning. There was light enough for each to see the other's face. They exchanged one brief glance. There was that in the eyes of both that could not be mistaken.

"I mean," said Fagin, casting aside all disguise, "not too violent for safety."

Sikes leaped into the street without reply. Turning his head neither right nor left, but looking straight before him with his teeth so set that the strained jaw seemed starting through the skin, he sped to his dwelling, double-locked the door and lifted a heavy table against it.

His entrance had awakened her. She raised herself with a startled look.

"Bill," said she, in a low tone of alarm, "why do you look like that at me?"

Seizing her by the head and throat, he dragged her into the middle of the room, looked once at the door, and put his great hand over her mouth.

"Bill—Bill!" she gasped, wrestling with the strength that mortal fear gave her. "I—I won't scream or cry—not once—hear me—speak to me—tell me what I have done!"

"You know, you she-devil!" he replied, suppressing his breath. "You were watched to-night!"

"Then spare me, for the love of heaven!" she cried, clinging to him. "Bill, dear Bill, you cannot have the heart to kill me! Think of all that I have given up this night, only this one night, for you Bill. Bill, for dear God's sake, for your own, for mine, stop before you spill my blood! I have been true to you, upon my guilty soul I have!"

He struggled violently to release himself; but her arms were around him, and tear as he would he could not tear them away.

"A little—little time," she sobbed.

He freed one arm and grasped his pistol. The certainty of immediate detection if he fired flashed across his mind even in the midst of that fury. He turned it and beat twice, with all his mighty strength, upon the upturned face.

She staggered and fell away from him. From a deep gash in her forehead the blood ran into her eyes and blinded her. But she raised herself to her knees and held out her hands.

It was a ghastly sight to see. The murderer tottered backward. He shut out the sight with one uplifted hand. With the other he seized a heavy club and struck her down.

The sun, rising fast, began to send light into the room despite the drawn curtain. He had not moved for a long time, it seemed to him. There had been a moan, and a motion of the hand, and he had struck, and struck again, more in terror than rage. Once he threw a ragged rug over the body; but it was worse that way. He plucked it off again.

He kindled a fire and thrust the club into it. He washed himself and rubbed his clothes and cut out spots in them that he could not clean. The room was fearfully stained. The very feet of his dog were bloody.

While he was doing what he had to do he took care, for some reason that was not clear to him, never to turn his back on the body. He could not bear to do so for even a moment. When he was ready to go he went backward toward the door, dragging his dog lest he should soil his feet anew and carry evidence of the crime into the street.

He crossed over and glanced at the window, wondering if anything could be visible from the outside. The curtain was drawn and all was still as if a peaceful, untroubled sleeper lay in there.

He whistled to the dog and walked away rapidly.

He struck out sturdily till he got clear of London and into the country. He walked through heaths and woods and villages and fields for many miles. Then he laid himself under a hedge and slept. Then he got up again and turned into the highroad and walked toward London once more. Then back again—then wandering up and down the fields, and lying in ditches to rest, and starting up to make for some other spot and ramble on again.

He started many times, with steady enough purpose, to one or another village to get something to eat or drink. Every time the people, the very children seemed to be looking out from every window for him. Again and again he turned away, not daring to enter the place, though he was faint with hunger.

It was late at night before he could force himself into an ale house. He sat alone in a corner, eating and drinking there with his dog. A company of rustic laborers was sitting around the fire, listening to a peddler who had just produced some cleansing paste and was praising it with the usual chatter of his class. Having removed stains from the garments of several, he turned suddenly to Sikes and cried: "Here is a stain on the hat of this gentleman—"

He got no further. With a hideous curse, Sikes overthrew the table and rushed from the place.

Finding presently that he was not pursued, he recovered sufficiently to reason that they probably considered him merely some drunken, surly fellow, and he tried to plan what he should do next. It was dark and he was in doubt. At last he found a shed in a field, and decided to seek rest for the night.

He laid himself close to the wall. The formless feeling that had overcome him in the room, that had been growing on him all day, had formed itself now into a fear of something that was behind him. Even though he pressed as closely as he could to the wall and kept his face turned to the black space of the shed, he had this terror.

While he lay there he heard shouting in the distance. He regained his courage at the prospect of danger that he could meet, and he sprang up, to see a building ablaze far across the fields. There were people there—light and activity. It was like new life to him. He ran toward the place.

They were playing on the fire with an engine and with buckets. Everybody was shouting, and Sikes shouted, too, and plunged into the wild work, now working at the pumps, now hurrying into the smoke and fire, but always seeking the place where men were thickest.

He toiled till morning came and there was nothing left but a hill of embers and blackened ruins. The mad excitement over his fear came on him ten-fold. He looked suspiciously at the little groups that formed to converse about the fire. The dog obeyed the stealthy beck of his finger. They slunk off quietly together.

He walked till he almost dropped. He lay in a hidden lane and had a long, uneasy sleep. He walked again, and turned hither and thither irresolute. He feared another solitary night in the black fields. Suddenly this fear so grew that he resolved to turn back to London.

"There's somebody to speak to there at least!" he said to himself. "A good hiding place, too, after all this country scent. I'll lie by for a week and then force blunt from Fagin and get across to France. Damme, I'll risk it!"

It came to him that the dog would betray him. He picked up a heavy stone and tied it in a handkerchief and walked along, looking for a pond.

The animal looked up into his master's face. Perhaps the robber's side glance at him warned him. He began to skulk a little in the rear. When Sikes stopped at the brink of a pool and looked around to call him he stopped outright.

"Do you hear me call?" exclaimed Sikes. "Come here!"

The dog came up from the force of habit, but the moment Sikes stopped to tie the stone to him he started back with a deep growl.

"Come back!" said Sikes.

The dog wagged his tail, advanced, retreated, paused an instant, turned, and scoured away at top speed.

Sikes whistled again and again, and sat down to wait for the animal to return. But no dog appeared, and at last he resumed his journey.

That night, in a room at the top of a filthy tenement that stood close on the Thames overhanging a muddy creek that ebbed and flood along the rotten foundations of the house, there sat Toby Crackit and two others of Fagin's gang. Toby Crackit, quite abandoning the swagger for which he was famous, looked gloomily on one of his companions, who had just come in with news. "This is a smash!" said he, biting his lips. "There's more than one will go with this."

"Every ken is filled with traps," said the bringer of news. "You should ha' heard the people groan when they brought Fagin out. The officers fought like devils, or they'd ha' torn him away. He clung to them, all muddy and bleeding, as if they was his dearest friends."

The three sat in silence, their eyes fixed on the floor. Suddenly there was a pattering of feet on the stairs, and Sikes's dog bounded into the room. They ran to the stairs and crept down. The street door was bolted still. Evidently the dog had jumped in through an open window.

"He can't be coming here!" said Toby Crackit when they returned to the room. "I—I hope not."

"He's been to the other kens," said one of the three, "and found 'em full of strangers, and so come on here. I think the other has got out of the country and left the dog behind." They looked furtively at Bull's-eye, who slunk as furtively under a chair. Thus they sat, speaking in whispers for some hours, when there came a knock at the door. They knew, without words, who it must be.

"We must let him in," said Crackit with a shaking voice.

"Don't leave us in the dark!" snarled the other thief, hurrying to light a second candle.

Crackit returned with Sikes. He looked from one to another. Nobody spoke. "Damn you all!" said he at last. "Have you nothing to say to me?"

There was an uneasy movement among them, but no speech.

He dragged a chair to the wall, close as it could go, so close that he ground it against the wall, and sat down.

"Do you mean to sell me or let me lie here till this hunt is over?" he asked after a long silence.

"You may stop here, if you think it is safe," said Crackit, with an effort.

But Bull's-eye, fleeing from the betrayal planned by his master, had betrayed him. Every policeman in London knew the dog. Men had followed him from place to place; and now there were a hundred closing around the house. Even as Crackit spoke they cast off all concealment and surrounded the place and beat upon the door, and cried to those within to surrender the murderer.

"In the King's name!" rang a great voice, and the roar of the wild mob echoed it and clamored for his life.

"Damn you!" said Sikes. "I'll cheat you yet!"

He hurried to a cupboard and drew out a long rope. Rushing to the housetop, he fastened one end firmly to the chimney, and with hands and teeth knotted it around his chest. He lowered himself over the parapet to drop into the ditch alongside, where he hoped to find cover enough to keep away while the mob was working at the front of the house.

At this moment the terror came over him again. He turned suddenly, his foot slipped, the rope slipped like lightning, the knot ran tightly around his neck, and he dropped the rope's full length. There was a terrific jerk, a fearful convulsion of limbs. Then he hung still.

A white dog leaped to the roof's edge with a dismal howl, gathered himself for a spring, and jumped for the dead man's shoulders. He missed his aim, turned over and over, and dashed out his brains in the ditch.

"In one of these visits of state, Mr. Sikes met a girl who had the fortune to gain his approval."